

THE ESSENCE OF BEING WITH WHAT IS: Thirty-Three Years with Focusing

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The essence of what I have learned from Focusing over the years is *all about* being with what is. Just being with. That is the crux of the whole process — the ability to just *be with* what's there.

In my years with Focusing, I took that “being with” into all the aspects of my life. One significant example was my whole relationship with my husband, Irv. That was a difficult process and took many years to get right, but in the end, I finally got to the place of being with and accepting Irv — just exactly how he was. When he passed away suddenly, in 2006, we had just celebrated our 55th anniversary and were in a peaceful, loving place with one another.

Focusing has influenced so many of my life challenges and decisions including all the changes that come with aging. Through all of it, the concept of *being with . . .* has been the guiding principle.

MY PROFESSIONAL HISTORY WITH FOCUSING

I am now 78 years old. I first heard the word Focusing in 1978 when I was 47 years old. I was at the Chicago Counseling Center taking a Practicum in Person-Centered Counseling. I had raised four children, had been a housewife, and at that time was also an office manager for an appliance company — refrigerators, washers and dryers. I was aware of an inner calling for “something” that would engage me in some way that I didn't feel engaged, but I did not know what that was.

That “something” became known through finding the Chicago Counseling Center Practicum — a totally serendipitous occurrence. A young woman in the office where I was working invited me to meet her at a certain bar to hear a jazz pianist. When I arrived, she wasn't there, so I sat down at the bar to wait. There were two men, also at the bar, involved in conversation, and I overheard one of them say that he was a “part-time shrink.” It caught my ear, but I was mainly just looking out for my friend. Then all of a sudden, at the other end of the bar, there was a ruckus. A man and a woman were arguing loudly with each other, and I heard the woman say, “Just take your ring!” She took the engagement ring off her finger and threw it, and it landed on the floor between this man at the bar and me. We both leaned down to pick it up — nearly bumping heads, and because of that encounter, we informally began to chat with each other.

I asked him about that “part-time shrink” remark, and he told me that he was a salesman during the day and doing an evening practicum in Carl Rogers' Person Centered Therapy at the Chicago Counseling and Psychotherapy Center. Something in me was saying, “Yes! I want that!” I took down some information, called the CCPC, went for an inter-

view and knew that if I was accepted, I wanted to do their next counseling practicum. I felt drawn to the training because I had an inner calling for ‘*something*’ — which was not yet clear, but it was ‘*there*’ . . . *waiting*. . . *and this seemed to be a right step toward that unclear “something.”*

If that woman had not broken her engagement that night, my life might have taken a whole different path, because it is very unlikely that I would have spoken to this man otherwise. And as it turned out, my friend never showed up!

At the CCPC, I met Jim Iberg, one of the counselors there and one of the teachers of the Practicum. One night, Jim talked about a process called Focusing. I was perplexed, didn’t comprehend it, and yet, knew that I wanted to know more about it. I was intrigued by the idea of what it was — even though I did not understand it at all.

So I kept asking more about it, and in 1979, Jim Iberg introduced me to Doralee Grindler (later Grindler Katonah) who was looking for somebody to help her set up a training program to teach people how to do Focusing. She was the first Director of what became the Focusing Institute (set up in a corner of Gene Gendlin’s office at the University of Chicago). We made an instant connection. Doralee and I created a three-month training program — the first training program for teaching Focusing. I remember that Akira Ikemi, later one of the first Coordinators in Japan and one of the founders of the Japan Focusing Association, was in that first program. For teachers we had Doralee, Hannah Frisch, Allan Rohlf, Jim Iberg — and Gene Gendlin, of course. It was an exciting time. After the training program I began to teach Focusing professionally.

In 1980, a large counseling center in Columbia, Indiana invited Doralee and me to come down and teach Focusing. By the end of the weekend, everybody said that Clearing a Space was the most valuable piece that they had gotten from the training, because it gave them the opportunity to put everything aside and just feel this wonderful sense of wholeness, which was so easy to lose when working with all their difficult clients. We came back and talked to Gene about it, and that is how, in his own teaching, as well as our team teaching, we began to put much more emphasis on Clearing a Space.

For the next twenty years I was part of the Focusing Institute teaching staff as well as an associate at the Chicago Counseling Center, teaching Focusing to individuals and groups. I was part of the “Clearing A Space with People with Cancer” research team, taught Dreams and Creativity groups in the Netherlands and Germany, and most importantly, always found myself ‘*being with*’ every new experience in a focusing way.

MY PERSONAL JOURNEY WITH FOCUSING

Focusing has had a great impact on me personally. At the time I came to Focusing, even though I was 47, there was a part of me that was still in my late teenage years — that age where you are really exploring to find who you are. Looking back, I can see how I grew dramatically through knowing Focusing. I grew up and now, at age 78, I am reluctant to say I have “grown old”. I would prefer to say that I have grown up — through the teenage years into the mature years and now, into the elder years.

I see myself now as an elder who strives to keep my childhood adventuresome self present. With Focusing, I was able to make many decisions that took me on adventures; I also gave myself permission to try things that I might not have otherwise done.

A good example is taking up Tae-Kwan-Do at age 62. When I was considering starting Tae-Kwan-Do, I had several Focusing sessions before I made up my mind. And it became clear that I had a 6-year-old in me who wanted to have an experience and an adventure — a 6-year old who loved the idea of getting a free uniform! With Focusing I sensed the rightness of giving myself permission to start Tae-Kwan-Do — and if I didn't like it, it would be OK to quit. That was something I could never do when I was a kid. If you started something, you had to finish it. In my Focusing sessions, I kept getting the memory of how my parents refused to let me have piano lessons, giving me as a reason that my two older sisters had had piano lessons and they both quit. Therefore, I couldn't have piano lessons because I, too, would quit. I never knew whether I could play the piano or not.

So, all those many Focusing sessions helped me to give myself permission to go ahead with Tae-Kwan-Do, (and go through four weeks with the free uniform!) and if I didn't like it, it was OK not to continue. But it turned out that I loved it from the very first move, and wound up staying with it for ten years. When my husband and I decided to move to California in 1997, I first needed to find the right Tae-Kwan-Do school before choosing a neighborhood in which to live.

I know that my doing Tae-Kwan-Do has influenced many people to try things that they either thought they couldn't do or thought they were too old to do. Witnessing my own challenges allowed other people to see that you can be older and still do adventurous things. For several years at the 'Focusing Follies' (a delightful talent show at the annual International Focusing Conference), I would demonstrate my Tae-Kwan-Do form, and would regularly hear from people afterward about how very meaningful it was for them to watch.

Focusing was with me not just when I started Tae-Kwan-Do, but all through the process of being in Tae-Kwan-Do. As it became increasingly harder and ever more challenging, I would often sit with questions like, "*Is this still right for me? Do I still want to do this? Is it time to let it go?*" I was Focusing all the way along, during which time I became a third degree black belt and won the World Tae-Kwan-Do Championship for women over 60.

After ten years, I had another *internal knowing*, again through Focusing, that Tae-Kwan-Do was no longer right for me — it was time to stop. That is when I moved on to yoga, which I am still doing. I took the yoga teacher training program and enjoyed it very much, yet when the training was done, I decided that I actually preferred to be a student.

HEALTH CHALLENGES

Another big area of support from Focusing is what you could call my 'health challenges'. I had breast cancer in 1987 and Focused my way through that, for sure!

I collaborated with Doralee, in the writing of an article on the subject of Focusing and cancer, published in the 1999 Focusing *Folio*. I completely recovered from breast cancer and haven't had any recurrence.

More recently, I have had digestive problems that have been difficult to diagnose.

When I was sick, I was really sick. That sickness would last a couple of days, and then I was fine. Then I was not fine. And I never knew when the change was going to happen. The *not-knowing* gave 'living on the edge' new meaning. I would make plans and then I would have to cancel them, including long-awaited trips to International Focusing Conferences in Canada, Israel and Japan. I missed out on a lot of things. I have been experiencing this condition for seven years. What was especially peculiar was living with these digestive issues for three years before they were finally diagnosed as a rare form of neuro-endocrine tumors.

I have now had four surgeries. I cannot even count how many hospitalizations I have had. I finally did get to Israel, but once I arrived there I had yet another hospitalization and surgery, and my daughter Marcia had to fly out to join me. My dear focusing friends in Israel, Ruth Hirsch, Atsmaout and Haim Perlstein, and Bilha Frolinger took special care of me and Marcia.

I am now in the process of another very major change: having to give up my home and move in with my daughter and her family. It is a very big adjustment. There is a sense of comfort that comes from having family around. At the same time, I am not in *my* home. I am living in somebody else's home, even though my daughter and family have been so open, gracious and loving. So it is the both/and. The "this" and the "that" — another instance of needing to be with what is.

Aging brings about its own set of problems and challenges. My friend Mary Lou and I laugh a lot about the fact that what we talked about 25 years ago, when we became friends, is nothing like what we talk about today. Today, everything seems to be about health. However, with the aging process, there is an attitude of, "*Where's the gift here? What can we learn from it? How do we keep going? How do we maintain our humor, our sense of purpose, our enjoyment of life, our ability to contribute something?*"

One way I find myself contributing comes through talking to fellow students after yoga class. They are all younger than I am. Sometimes I will give them little tidbits of learned wisdom or little stories of my life. And I can see that my enthusiasm sparks something in them connected to the fact that being a person in your late 70's does not necessarily mean that you are *only* ready for the old people's home. While it may be true for some people — there *can* be other ways of growing older.

I really enjoy and appreciate being able to be an inspiration to younger people and helping them to see that they may have more capacity for aging well than they may have thought.

In the Focusing community I see myself more and more taking the role of a mentor. Focusing Professionals will call me, and we will talk about something that they feel kind of

stuck with in their teaching, or their clients, or whatever . . . We do a little Focusing together, and I give them something — whatever I can. I love being a mentor.

I appreciate being able to support the Focusing community through my role as a Board Member of the Focusing Institute. The Focusing Institute has always been close to my heart, and I have supported its growth since the early days in Chicago.

And when I think of all the wonderful people I have met through the Focusing community, I am filled with gratitude, especially toward Gene Gendlin, for having put his work out into the world. My life has been enriched . . . in so many ways.

As I reflect upon how Focusing has been with me (and how I have been with it!) through so many life changes and decisions, including all of the challenges of aging, what stays with me in the end is: *Being with what is, with a focusing attitude of friendly curiosity, brings me life forwarding change.*

REFERENCES

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